Giacomo's dark tan skin melted with the shadowed tree trunk, he had his stomach pressed up against it. The sun had begun to set, sending the lush bright forest into a hazy darkening maze. Twenty feet to his right was Aldaberto, also pressed against a tree. Aldaberto had covered himself in oversized dark-brown long-sleeved and mud-covered pants to help him blend into the forest. Aldaberto gave Giacomo a look of concern and impatience, before the light steps of horses and rickety wooden carriage spokes rolled behind them. Both men lightly rested their bodies tight to the tree. The hooves and wheels got louder and louder and mingled with the new sound of the driver whistling a comforting tune. Giacomo peered to the right of his tree, finally saw the head of one of the horses, and nodded to Aldaberto. Aldaberto shoved all of his body against the tree, and the trunk started to come out of the drenched dirt embankment it jutted from. Giacomo shoved his body against his tree, and it also upended easily. *SMASH!* The horses bucked back a little from the tree pushed by Aldaberto, then quickly jumped forward from Giacomo's tree falling, which pulled the carriage driver into the dirt. Aldaberto and Giacomo had already gotten to the driver before he could stand and both stabbed him in the neck before he could get to his feet.

A high-pitched scream came from the carriage. Giacomo shot his eyes up at a woman wearing dark-blue cloth pants, a green tunic, and bright-yellow wooden clogs as she held herself up with her left hand on the carriage. As quick as he saw her, he sunk his knife into her stomach. Giacomo caught her slumped body and slowly laid her on the ground.

"Okay, let's search the carriage," Aldaberto said "I'll check the bodies and see what is in the trunk on top, you see what's inside."

Giacomo didn't say anything and stepped up the tiny wooden carriage steps into the carriage. Inside was cramped and stuffy even with it being empty except for a small black bag. The cramped room made him curve his back into an S to see around the carriage. Sweat started down his face and he felt his hot breath be pushed back at him from the walls of the room. Giacomo's pupils doubled before he sprang his back straight to get the black bag and squished himself back into an S to get himself free.

After he sprung back out of the carriage, he stepped over the woman to walk to the horses. "This is all I found inside. Doesn't really feel like anything is in it." Giacomo held open the bag and dug into it. "It's just filled with a bunch of folded papers with words on them. This isn't anything."

He threw the bag a few feet from the woman. Neither Giacomo nor Aldaberto paid attention to the woman. A light sigh came from her mouth.

"There isn't much in the trunks either. Just badly made clothes and, even worse, made candles." Aldaberto jumped down to the driver's bench, then to the ground.

"*Stop where you two are*!" shouted a man.

Aldaberto and Giacomo looked to the end of the carriage to see two men pointing old rusty small revolvers at them. The two men at the log had on a dark-red beret, a puke-green tunic

under a dark-blue wool coat, black pants, and sturdy brown boots. Aldaberto and Giacomo turned to face the two officers with their hands in the air.

"Drop your knives to the ground and step to the left," the officer on the left ordered.

The knives lightly clanged when they stuck into the mud. In synchronization, Aldaberto and Giacomo stepped one foot to the left. Aldaberto bolted toward the trees on his own. Both officers opened fire on Aldaberto, which caused Giacomo to duck and use his arms to shield his head. A bullet went through Giacomo's right calf; he grabbed it, screamed in pain, and fell into the mud.

Aldaberto only managed to run seven feet before three bullets went straight through him.

*****

Giacomo rested on a thin and dirty cotton mat on the cell floor as he stared at the ceiling in boredom. Luckily, his cell had a fist sized-window at the top center of the wall, opposite the cell bar doors that allowed him a brief moment of happiness and ignorant bliss in his otherwise dismal predicament. If he had kept up with the rises and falls of the sun, this should be his last day in the small cold filth-riddled jail cell. The sun was blocked by dense clouds today, however.

A guard walked up to Giacomo's cell and said, "It's time for you to leave, Giacomo. I'm kind of sad to see you go."

"Thank you, Luca. I do have to say, you are not too bad compared to other guards and places I've been." Giacomo laughed so loud he vibrated the bar doors of all twenty cells.

Luca unhooked a key chain with twenty-one different keys from a metal ring sewn into his black leather belt. He started from the left and counted to the tenth key; the key screeched in the keyhole as he turned the lock. The old slightly rusted wheels of the jail cell door caused it to jam until Luca slowly pulled it forward, then swiftly jerked it open. "Please follow me so I can get you your belongings back and file you out," Luca said with a smile.

*****

Giacomo walked around the market part of the harbor. Young children worked with old men and women as they sold whole, cooked, and filleted fish of all species. The kids cooked the fish, tended to the cooking fires, and cleaned the cooking pans while the old people would take orders. Once someone bought a fish, the old worker would have the kids wrap up the fish and put it in a box, then the kid would hand it to the old person to give to the hungry customer. Giacomo stopped to see where the merchant ships were docked. As he scanned the horizon, his pupils slightly widened at the sight of a dark purple flag with a gold outline of a bear.

The multi-leveled ship slowly rocked alone. Two men argued on the dock, by the stern of the ship. "Quarter of our ammunition isn't enough!" argued the man on the left. He wore brown chain boots, black pants, a brown shirt, and a straw hat with a one-foot diameter.

“We will be fine, Paolo! This is a simple trip that is on the safest route in the world. I am also captain of this ship,” the captain countered.

Paolo loudly sighed and conceded, “Okay.”

“I don’t want to interrupt, but I was hoping I could join your voyage,” Giacomo inquired after he was a few feet from the two.

The Captain looked at Giacomo’s face and said, “Have you been on a ship before?”

“Yeah, I worked on a fishing ship for four years. I’m not looking for long-term employment; I need to leave this place,” Giacomo answered.

“Perfect for both of us,” the captain happily said. “I’m Captain Fausto, and this is my second mate Paolo,” he said as he shook Giacomo’s hand.

“My name is Giacomo.”

Captain Fausto motioned with his right arm, pointing down the dock as he said, “Let me show you around the Castle, it’s what call the ship.” Paolo stayed and thought to himself while Captain Fausto and Giacomo walked toward and onto the ship. Maybe he could pay for the cannonballs with his own gold,’ but decided against it and begrudgingly followed them onto the ship.

*****

They huddled together, cold and shaking as they watched the ship get swallowed by the sea monster. The monster tightly grasped the ship; its tentacles had wrapped around it numerous times. Captain Fausto had no idea how the three of them made it to shore alive. All three of them gazed in fear and astonishment while the sea beast’s tentacles finally squeezed together one last time, and the ship exploded. The ship’s debris strolled along the waves until they would come to shore.

“What are we going to do now? Everyone and everything is gone,” Paolo said with fear.

“We are going to look for the nearest town,” Captain Fausto instructed. “Before we do that, we need to make a fire.”

They all went to find materials and take their minds off of the attack. Captain Fausto had heard the stories but never believed them simple stories to keep children from going too far into the water. As they walked, a chill tingle ran through the veins of Captain Fausto’s legs. Sand weighed heavy on his body as the wind picked it up and chucked it against him, and it clung to his legs.

“Do those trees seem like they’re not getting closer to us?” Captain Fausto asked Paolo, who was behind him, over his shoulder. “Paolo, did you hear me?” As Captain Fausto trudged, he turned his head to see what was wrong with Paolo. Paolo had stopped and was standing in place with a distant stare toward the ground. Captain Fausto walked toward Paolo to snap him

out of it. “Come on, Paolo. We need to keep moving. We have to, for them.” Captain Fausto went to tug Paolo forward, but as soon as Captain Fausto’s fingers touched Paolo’ leather armor, he crumbled into a pile of sand.

“*What the fuck*?” Captain Fausto screamed “Giacomo! Paolo is gone! He turned to sand!”

Captain Fausto swung around, looking for an acknowledgment, only to find nothing but a sea of sand and the whistle of the winds. Captain Fausto shook uncontrollably as he turned himself in circles in search of anything. He took off back toward the tree line; finally, he was able to get closer to them. His legs gave out when he got to the trees. His head hit a root that jutted out of the soil. He groaned, still on the ground; he put his hand to his head, pulled it away, and saw his hand drenched in blood. He got up slowly and used a tree for support. When he tried to pull his hand away from the tree, long sticky strings of a dark golden substance from the bark clung to him. He scramble-walked backward to tear his hand from the tree. After four mighty pulls, the sap finally released him, and he stumbled back over a root and smacked his head on the ground again.

He woke up back on the beach with no sign of Paolo or Giacomo or anything from the ship.

*****

Captain Fausto creaked his eyes open. A drop of water fell between a crack from his roof of sticks and leaves, hastily made yesterday, onto his forehead. He sighed deeply and rubbed his stomach. He turned over onto his belly and used his arms to crawl out from under his stick tent. Captain Fausto sighed again as he grabbed a thick stick from the top of the roof and trudged into the unknown jungle forest.

Captain Fausto tried to find some tracks of an animal to hunt, but he couldn’t find any tracks after four hours, so he stopped to listen for moving water. The faint whoosh of water was heard to his back left. He started to walk to the river with assistance from his hunting stick. As he walked in silence, he heard two voices, but Captain Fausto couldn’t figure out where they were coming from. “*Hello*?” Captain Fausto shouted, “*Please help*!”

“Did you hear that? That sounded like Captain Fausto,” Paolo said to Giacomo.

“We should shout back,” Giacomo told Paolo.

“*Captain Fausto*! *Where are you*?” Paolo shouted back.

“*I’m over here*! *I’m coming toward you*. *Keep shouting*!” Captain Fausto shouted as he ran.

“*I see you*, *Captain*!” Paolo shouted and pointed at the filthy, dingy man that hobbled on a long stick.

*****

They walked for hours until they came to a well-worn path. They walked by two men who only wore cloths in the front that were about twice the height of all three of them. “Are those the people that found you two?” Captain Fausto asked Giacomo, his eyes focused on the men, now behind them. Their skin was a light muddy green with small bumps that bordered their eyes and went in a parallel line to their ulna bone.

“Yes, sir. They call themselves the Andritan people,” Giacomo said.

Captain Fausto turned his head back around and saw a wall four stories high.

“They said if we found you, we should bring you to the queen,” Paolo told Captain Fausto while he positioned himself next to him.

The dirt path connected diagonally to a road made of smooth interlocking stones. Stone and wood buildings lined both sides of the road. There were other lizard-skinned humanoids standing around; some stared at them while others ignored them. The road in front of the three men seemed to go on forever, and the offshoots did too. The rooftop edges were covered in dark-ocean blue, gold, and dark-jungle-green paint. Every stone building was at least two stories or more, all of them filled with Andritans of all heights and widths.

“Have you been able to talk to the people?” Captain Fausto asked them.

Both of them hesitated before Paolo answered, “At first, it was difficult. But eventually, we were able to understand the basics.”

Captain Fausto unworriedly told them, “Well, that’s good.”

One building dwarfed all of the other buildings around it. A dark stone made up the foundation and first floor. The second floor was of dark-red clay bricks with engravings of historical events; gold and silver filled in the deep and perfect carvings. These red bricks stretched up for four stories. The next two stories were made of light tan wood with dark-green, red, gold, and blue lines stacked on top of one another that ran the full width of the top two floors.

“Holy mackerel!” Captain Fausto exclaimed. “That building is huge! They must be extremely wealthy. Do you know if they’re wealthy?” Captain Fausto turned to Paolo.

“We have not seen any coin, but they wear a lot of gold and gems. We did not think it was a good idea to take advantage of these people since they took care of us, sir. We helped them out a few times too,” Paolo told Captain Fausto.

“Is there anything I should know before I meet this leader?”

Paolo turned to Captain Fausto and said, “Women are in power here. The Andritan people are led by a female ruler.”

“So, what is her name? I’m sure she and I can come to a mutual agreement,” Captain Fausto seductively said with a slight laugh. Silence rose between them. “Are you guys alright? You don’t seem like yourselves.”

“Yeah, we’re alright, sir. It’s been very stressful, and we’ve worked long days, not to mention the stress of having to understand and correctly follow their customs. With you missing and everyone but us dead, we thought you had also died. I’m grateful to these...people for taking care of us.”

Giacomo stopped in his tracks at this point; he turned with a tremble. His face turned a brown-red clay color with tears that filled his eyes and flowed over his cheeks as he struggled to speak, “They...they killed two girls, for some reason. We think it was a sacrifice because they put crowns on their heads that were made of vines and leaves, with a few emeralds set into them. We have figured out they do not have boats like us either. We have decided to stay and try to join their culture as much as we can.”

As he wiped away his tears, Captain Fausto looked at them both and said, “That is terrible!”

“We better hurry to the palace,” Giacomo said.

*****

The three men finally got to the palace. Captain Fausto stood back in awe with his neck at ninety degrees. The floor above the next shrank in width, but the palace was still larger than any other building around it. No other building around shined like it either. Blood red, jungle green, and dark blue outlined the top and bottom of the floors. A four-foot wall surrounded the palace with guards ready for anything. Giacomo stopped Captain Fausto and Paolo fifty feet from two guards stationed at an entrance to the palace. Giacomo took out a necklace with a long oval-shaped light-pink rock as a pendant and showed it to the guards. The guards stood aside for Giacomo. He then motioned for Paolo and Captain Fausto to come over. The guards glared with suspicion at them as the three walked into the palace. The twenty-foot-tall entrance led to a very long hallway with torches that barely lit the tiled ground.

“How long is this hallway?”

“We’re almost there, sir. These people are extravagant builders,” Paolo told Captain Fausto.

“Yes, if you can call never-ending dark hallways extravagant,” Captain Fausto arrogantly scoffed.

Paolo gave a quiet sigh in response. The hallway turned left at ninety degrees.

“Oh great! More extravagant hallways,” Captain Fausto sarcastically said.

Two guards both held six-foot-long weapons that had a large flat stone at both ends. Silver coated the top half of each stone. A thick dark magenta cloth curtain hung behind the

guards. Paolo showed the stone again. One guard looked to the other with a grunt that told him to pull back the left half of the curtain. As soon as the guard put his huge fingers between the curtains, a beam of gold light shone through. The curtains opened to a room with a ceiling so high that the light from the open flames only licked halfway up the walls. Captain Fausto was astonished at the colors, engravings, and intricately patterned cloth tapestries hung on the walls. A patch of dirt floor was walled off from the pristine dark-blue and green present on the palace floor. Crowds filled and cut an uneven wave, five to seven feet bottoms of the walls. A pathway led to a large throne that was held up and encircled by a set of twenty stairs. The throne was made of gold-covered wood with all kinds of colored gems set into the gold. Two guards came to meet Captain Fausto, Giacomo, and Paolo. Giacomo immediately showed the stone, and they were led to the throne.

A beam of sunlight somehow shone on the leader, creating an all-powerful aura around her. Giacomo and Paolo lowered their heads. Paolo strictly told Captain Fausto to bow his head. In quick recognition, Captain Fausto bent his neck.

"Hello, Queen Ansoware. This is my sire," Giacomo explained in a language that Captain Fausto could not understand.

"We shall get the room and woman and plaza ready," Queen Ansoware responded.

Captain Fausto raised his head and walked toward Queen Ansoware, "I thank you for taking care of my men."

Right away, Queen Ansoware sprang from her throne with one of the two-sided stone spears and held it close to Captain Fausto's neck; quickly, he crumpled to the floor as he yelled, "*Woah*! *Woah*! *Woah*!"

"I'm sorry, Queen Ansoware, we come from a different place, and I haven't yet explained your customs," Giacomo said in Queen Ansoware's language.

She narrowed her eyes but eased away from Captain Fausto.

"T-T-T-T-Thank you, Giacomo," Captain Fausto stammered as he stood up.

"No one is allowed to approach the leader," Giacomo said, "It's considered a challenge to take the throne."

Captain Fausto furrowed his brow and exploded at Giacomo, "Have you two even *tried* to get back home?!"

"Umm...so far, we haven't been able to figure out a way to leave," Giacomo said.

"Ask right now," Captain Fausto demanded

"Captain Fausto wants to know how we can leave," Giacomo sheepishly told Queen Ansoware.

“You know where to leave. First the ceremony,” Queen Ansoware said.

Captain Fausto immediately asked, “What did she say?”

“She will help after the ceremony. I will warn you that it is an extremely primitive cultural ceremony,” Giacomo told Captain Fausto.

“Alright, what do I have to do?”

“You have to fight one of their warriors to the death.”

Stunned, Captain Fausto asked, “When is it going to happen? And how do you know their language?”

Giacomo looked around for answers, “Come with me and Paolo. I will explain everything.” Quickly, Giacomo rushed Captain Fausto to the outside of the palace. “See, Captain, it isn’t so bad here. They treat us like kings. Their ceremonies are...strange, but after that, it’s great!” Giacomo started. “I’ll show you where I am living. It’s gigantic!”

Captain Fausto looked around sheepishly, then said, “Okay, let’s go there.”

Giacomo headed toward a gorgeous courtyard. Flowers of all colors filled the space and circled sky-high-trees with dark blue bark and green leaves. Multiple lizard people stared at the three of them. Only Captain Fausto studied them back.

“How long have you guys been here? It seems very odd that Giacomo is able to speak their language in such a short amount of time,” Captain Fausto inquired.

“I told you, Captain, we’ve been here for thirty or forty days,” said Giacomo.

Captain Fausto rubbed his head and said, “I could swear you said a few days.”

“I’ve been learning from my wife,” Giacomo said as he led them out of the courtyard into the bustling street filled with all types of exotic merchants and diverse purchasers. Many only glanced at the three, and then went back to what they were doing before. Children gazed in confusion, and old ones made gestures of goodwill toward the three.

“You don’t think it’s quick to already have a wife from these people? You aren’t planning to stay here, are you?” Captain Fausto asked.

“It happened fast. I didn’t understand what was going on at the time,” Giacomo sadly said.

“We’re a few blocks from my house. Around that corner, up there,” Giacomo said.

Once Captain Fausto turned the corner, a shadow was cast over him by a brown brick wall. The road had no other buildings on it. No citizen’s home was as well built or as tall as Giacomo’s home.

“Did they just give this to you?” Captain Fausto asked in astonishment.

“Oh yeah, pretty much,” Giacomo chuckled, “It’s amazing inside. the walls, a garden, a little ground bath, and a water pump with water so clear and smooth that it looks like air. These people have amazing technology in their homes. The house is never too hot or too cold. I don’t know how they control it, but somehow, the floors above the ground floor are always heated in the morning and night.”

As they got closer, they saw two guards stationed outside a knee-high metal gate.

“Don’t worry about them. They’re here as protection for us,” Giacomo said.

One of the guards opened the gate. Giacomo and Paolo both nodded to the guard, but Captain Fausto looked at him with fake confidence. As soon as Captain Fausto saw the courtyard, his jaw fell open. Women of all body shapes, heights, and sizes lounged around the medium-sized courtyard. “What are these women doing here? Do these people think we’re gods?” Captain Fausto stutter-asked.

“Something like that,” Giacomo chuckled. “Now you see why I haven’t tried to leave yet.”

Not a speck of dirt was in the courtyard, only lush green grass with tall and slender white trees scattered in bunches. Short yellow bush flowers encircled them.

“I’ll show you how nice it is inside.” Giacomo guided Captain Fausto into the home as Captain Fausto ogled the women.

Once inside, Captain Fausto snapped out of his own enchantment, and his expression changed to amazement as he looked at the interior. The temperature noticeably dropped compared to the outside. The floor was made of the same dirt as the courtyard floor outside; somehow, it was perfectly level and looked less dirty than outside. Two women brushed off the bottom of Giacomo’s and Paolo’s feet. Captain Fausto, again entranced, did as Giacomo and Paolo did without taking his eyes off either woman.

“You don’t seem as concerned as before, Captain,” Giacomo teased.

“I sort of understand why you’ve stayed. Which one of them is your wife?” Captain Fausto asked.

“Oh, yes. Come on down, Olmni.” Giacomo beckoned in the Ansoware language.

A gorgeous tall slender, more human-looking lizard woman came down a set of wooden stairs. She walked up to Captain Fausto and, with a smile, extended her hand and gave him a light handshake. “Hello, nice to meet you,” she said, relying more on the main phonetics, then looked to Giacomo for affirmation. He gave her a slight smile and nodded his head.

Captain Fausto shook her hand and smiled before he said, “Nice to meet you too. Your pronunciation is terrific. My name is Captain Fausto.”

She looked back to Giacomo with a confused smile. Giacomo translated what Captain Fausto said to her, which made her expression unauthentic brightness. After she let go of Captain Fausto's hand, she reached back with her left hand to get Captain Fausto to go into a room filled with wooden chairs and benches covered in pillows that were an assortment of magenta, purple, red, and dark orange.

Giacomo pointed to a large chair and said, "You can sit on the throne, Captain."

"Thank you. It looks the most comfortable. This truly is an amazing house, but we should try to figure a way to get home."

"You're right," Giacomo said as the four of them sat around a short but long table.

Captain Fausto sat on the throne at the end of the table that faced the room's entrance. Paolo sat in a thin chair to the right of Captain Fausto, and Giacomo sat with his wife on a bench to the left.

"So, what am I to expect at this ceremony besides the sacrifice?" Captain Fausto asked again.

Giacomo casually leaned farther back and said, "They sacrifice animals that look like goats, cows, and featherless chickens before sacrificing the girl. After the sacrifices, there is a long dance and feast that goes all night."

"Hopefully, they will let us leave afterward," Captain Fausto said as he too leaned back.

"Are you sure you want to leave so soon after you have seen all that they have given us?" Giacomo nudged Captain Fausto.

"Yes. This place seems like a paradise, but I think it would be better to go home," Captain Fausto somberly said. "I miss my home. The families deserve to know what happened to their husbands, sons, and brothers."

"You are right, Captain. They deserve to know," Giacomo said as he looked at the ground. He raised his head. "Let's go find some food for my wife to cook." Giacomo quickly stood up and extended his hand to Captain Fausto.

Captain Fausto sighed deeply, sat up, and accepted Giacomo's help to stand up. "Maybe we can find a featherless chicken," Captain Fausto chuckled as he wandered out of the room.

*****

Captain Fausto sat at the head of the table, Giacomo sat to Captain Fausto's right with his wife, and Paolo sat on Captain Fausto's left.

"*Hmm*! This is a delicious featherless chicken!" Captain Fausto said as he chewed another bite.

“I’m glad you like it. Maybe you can take some with you when you go back,” Giacomo told Captain Fausto.

“That’s a great idea! We would be richer than God himself!” exclaimed Captain Fausto with joy. Captain Fausto finished eating what looked like a chicken breast. “This has been an amazing time, but I need to go to sleep. Giacomo, do you have a room I could sleep in?”

“Yes, I do, Captain. My wife will show you where it is,” Giacomo happily said before he turned to his wife and, in a snipping fashion, told her to escort Captain Fausto in her language. She got up with a fake smile, walked toward Captain Fausto and the hallway, then gestured for him to follow her. “I’m glad you had a good time,” Giacomo laughed and smiled. Once Captain Fausto and his wife went around the corner, Giacomo turned to Paolo. He threw away his smile and said to Paolo, “I want you to convince the Captain to stay.”

“I will get on it first thing tomorrow,” Paolo said.

*****

Paolo found Captain Fausto in the courtyard as he had a half-hearted conversation with a woman from the day before and walked over to Captain Fausto with his wife. “Good morning, Captain. I’d like you to meet my wife, Fryda. Ohh…good to see you met someone,” Paolo happily said.

Captain Fausto turned his attention to Paolo, “I’ve been trying to understand her all morning, but it’s impossible! These things sound like they’re eating rock. I really don’t get what you and Giacomo see in this place.” Captain Fausto exhaled.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about today. I don’t want to live here, and neither does my wife. I know where their boats are. We can leave tonight!”

“Fantastic!” Captain Fausto gleefully exclaimed.

Paolo peered around Captain Fausto to the woman, then looked back at him and said, “Do you want to bring her?”

Captain Fausto looked over his shoulder with a small smile, then told Paolo, “No, definitely not.” The woman opened her mouth about to say something before Captain Fausto ignored her again to talk to Paolo. “Why are you taking your wife?’” he asked Paolo.

“She doesn’t want to be here. I told her that it would be dangerous and we might not find our way back. Not to mention that people will treat her like an animal,” Paolo said. “I told her all about our homeland, and she basically begged me to bring her with me if I ever got the chance to leave.”

“See you later,” Captain Fausto said to the woman as he got up and left with Paolo and Paolo’s wife. “When do we leave Paolo?”

"Tonight. I fear if we stay any longer, we will be killed by Giacomo and his goons," Paolo said with fear, "My wife is going to ask Giacomo's wife if she wants to come with us."

"Okay…why would we take her?" Captain Fausto concernedly asked.

"My wife accidentally told her about her leaving with me, but she said she needed time to think about it. She's going to see and ask her later today. We'll leave tonight after dinner. Until then, you and I should stay together for safety," Paolo said. "We are also going to stay here."

*****

Fryda entered Olmni's room with a pleasant smile and asked, "Have you made up your mind yet?"

Olmni couldn't meet Fryda's eyes and unsurely said, "I…I'm not coming. I want to stay here. I have a good life here."

Fryda looked at her with calm concern and asked, "Are you sure?"

Olmni looked into Fryda's eyes briefly enough to say, "I'm sure. You should leave."

Fryda hesitated for a moment before she left the room and reassured Olmni, "I'll try to find a way to let you know when we get there."

*****

After he tiptoed from his own room across the hall, Captain Fausto lightly double-tapped the door to Paolo's room. On the other side of the door, Paolo and Fryda both looked over at the door. Paolo hesitated for a moment, then went to the door and let Captain Fausto in. Paolo checked the hallway for any witnesses but did not see any and closed the door.

"Fryda and I made a rope to go out through the window," Paolo told Captain Fausto as he walked to the bed for the rope. Paolo double knotted the rope to the bedpost closest to the window set into the wall to the right of the bedpost. Paolo closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and went to the window. "As soon as we leave this window, we'll be moving quickly, Captain. We're going to follow my wife because she knows the quickest and safest way."

Captain Fausto nodded, and immediately, Paolo threw the rope out the window. The rope made a shush sound as it unraveled down the side of the house. Fryda went down first, Captain Fausto went down next, and last Paolo, but before he went down, he looked to the door. He took a chair and tucked it underneath the doorknob to slightly barricade the door.

Paolo crouched next to his wife and Captain Fausto on the ground around the makeshift rope. Almost immediately, Paolo and Captain Fausto looked at Fryda like lost and scared children. She straightened her back while crouched to make sure no one was around. Her eyes glowed light blue, which allowed her to better see in the dark. Paolo and Captain Fausto could barely keep up with her squatting gazelle-type gallop, which made their footsteps kick up some

dust but did not make a noise. They crossed a few streets until they came to a bridge flanked by a pair of stairs that led to skinny docks along a mile-wide, loud, rushing river.

Fryda slowed to a stop, then pointed to the docks and said, “We have to take one of the boats in the docks down there. All we have to do is push a boat to the river, and it will take us away very quickly to the ocean.”

“Follow her,” Paolo told Captain Fausto.

All three of them ran for the left entrance of the bridge to the docks. Fryda immediately saw a small lateen and quietly stepped aboard before she helped Paolo and Captain Fausto on board. As Fryda grabbed an oar, dozens of torches lit up the bridge and street above the docks. Eleven-foot-tall alligator men stood above the three of them, with eight-foot-spears in their right hands aimed at the small lateen.

Giacomo walked between two of the soldiers and said, “If you…”

Fryda shoved off the dock with the wooden oar to move into the raging river before Giacomo could say another word. The front of the boat zoomed out of its slip into the river. “*Throw*!” Giacomo ordered. A hailstorm of spears rose over and rained down on the lateen. Paolo threw himself over Fryda while Captain Fausto tried to take cover under a wooden plank bench and pressed himself against the side of the boat. As fast as lightning, the small lateen was swept away by the river. Spears pierced the hull and sides of the boat. Giacomo could only watch the tiny boat shrink into the distance and hope that they had been killed.

*****

Captain Fausto gave out a low groan and whimper as he used his right hand to push his left shoulder from a spear in the port-side wall. Captain Fausto struggled to use both of his arms to slide his left leg from another spear that penetrated the portside wall. Captain Fausto looked at the holes in his leg and shoulder, then remembered Paolo and Fryda. His eyes slowly scanned the boat and saw Paolo’s torso being cradled by Fryda as she sobbed in silence, her head pressed against his chest as though her tears would heal and bring him back to life. Captain Fausto’s eyes blurred instantly with tears. He looked away to get his mind off of Paolo.

“Where do you think we are?” Captain Fausto asked as he focused on the hundred-foot-thick dark brown trees that were so close to each other that they looked like a single impenetrable wall. Captain Fausto looked to Fryda, who still had her face buried in Paolo’s chest, and said under his breath, “Oh yeah. We have no way to communicate.”

*****

Two fishermen cautiously walk down wooden stairs that are bolted into the side of a cliff. The wooden stairs squeaked and bent with each step of the slightly overweight men. “Eventually, we’re going to have to change these steps. One of them is going to break, and one of us is going to fall to our death,” the fisherman said to the man in front of him as he looked between the wooden bars that held up the railing.

The man in front of him agreed. “We will after this season since we won’t be able to get to the sea without them.”

“Good. I’ll be happier knowing that we’re safe walking down these death traps.”

The man in front pointed to a small battered ship with a missing mast, “Nice! A shipwreck for us to explore!” He gained a slight hustle down the stairs from curiosity.

The two fishermen cautiously approached the beached, battered lateen, whose tattered sails could take her nowhere. One of the fishermen stretched up his neck to see into the boat, “There are two people in the boat! They look dead.”

“Let’s take them to a doctor. I’ll go get a cart for the big one,” the other fisherman said with raised eyebrows.

The fisherman came back a considerably long time later because of the large rocks that made up most of the beach with black sand between them.

*****

The audience thunderously applauded Fryda after she punched and knocked out her third and last opponent. Stands encircled the large circular fighting ring designed for ten fighters. A booming voice came from near the ring; it was Captain Fausto walking into the ring as he yelled, “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen! Give another hand to Man-Eater! I hope to see you tomorrow night!” Captain Fausto walked over to Fryda, grabbed her wrist, and raised her arm over her head as he cheered, “*Come back tomorrow to see more warriors try to defeat the undefeated Man-Eater*!” The crowd gave one last deafening applause before they left the arena.

Captain Fausto’s smile faded away before he lowered Fryda’s arm and let go of her wrist, then told her, “You did a great job tonight. The audience loved when you almost let that second guy beat you.” He handed her twelve gold coins, “Here’s your winnings.”

She looked at them with hollow, sweaty, and blood-blurred eyes and said, “Thank you.”

“Be happy I’m paying you again,” Captain Fausto sneered. “I’ll meet you back at the house later tonight. You better be there when I get back. You have an early fight in the morning.” Captain Fausto walked out of the arena and left Fryda alone.

*****

Captain Fausto lay slightly unconscious from his extreme drinking on a large pile of differently colored feather pillows. He mumbled about fights, Giacomo, and Paolo. The torches and moonlight dimly lit the room. A cleansing breeze flowed in one open window and out the others. Giacomo crept through the window from twenty feet behind the Captain with a short dagger in his right hand. He slouched as he walked to behind where the Captain lay and carefully flanked Captain Fausto’s neck and the top of his head. In one swift movement, Giacomo slashed Captain Fausto’s neck, which caused blood to spew from it as he gave a final gargle.

*****

Fryda sat in a daze with her hands tied in front of her as she rhythmically rocked left to right to left to right. “Where am I?” she asked.

“You’re on a boat. Taking you back,” Giacomo told her as he faced her and steered the small catamaran. “There are people worried about you, and you need to face your charges of treason and for killing my wife.”

Fryda stared at him in horror and stammered, “I-I-I didn’t kill her. I only told her about the plan to leave.”

“That might be true, but how will you prove it?” Giacomo snickered.

Fryda jumped to her feet and sprinted at Giacomo. Giacomo quickly stood up and reached for his small dagger right as Fryda’s body slammed into Giacomo. He soared through the air, his flight ending in a big splash. “*Help*!” Giacomo pleaded as he struggled to keep his head above water.

Fryda rummaged through a small chest at the back of the boat and found a knife. She used it to cut the rope. She looked around the sides of the boat for Giacomo but only heard and saw the water. She grabbed the steer and followed three gigantic red-feathered birds.